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AUTHOR Byard, Vicki
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ABSTRACT

The use of peer group critiquing in the writing classroom is based on the position that when the teacher is no longer viewed as the sole authority, learning becomes a collaborative endeavor. Yet peer groups are often marked more by inhibition and constraint than by collaboration, with students resisting both giving and receiving critiques. The distinguishing characteristic of peer critiquing is that it is coercive: it increases observation (a student's work is seen more often) and consequently discipline (which will be internalized, whether accurate or not). Teachers must recognize that the architecture of peer critiquing inherently operates at cross-purposes with their objectives for collaborative learning, and then develop the methodology to foster genuine collaboration within such groups. Otherwise, peer critiquing will be more likely to imprison than to empower. (SR)

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Vicki Byard

Purdue University

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Power Play: The Use and Abuse of Power Relationships in Peer Critiquing

The Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago has an exhibit on architecture, which includes several computers programmed to let visitors try their hands at architectural design. For example, one computer challenges visitors to design the work space of a corporate office so that the boss gets the view from the bay windows and is away from the noisy work areas of the clerks. Another computer in the exhibit asks a visitor to the museum to design a neighborhood by positioning on a grid office buildings, houses, apartment buildings, shopping centers, schools, churches and parks. The computer adds or deducts points for each placement, for example, awarding points if the schools are away from heavily-trafficked areas where the kids could be easily hit by cars. As teachers of writing, we have been similarly trying our hand at architectural design for the past decade, replacing the traditional structure of the classroom--the teacher front and center; the students ordered in rigid rows, facing only the teacher and the backs of other students--with a new architectural structure: the teacher moving around the classroom, with the students seated in small circular groups. And we are still in the process of determining how functional this design is, in other

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words, like the computers in Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, what points we should add or subtract for this architectural design.

Anne Gere's book Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications, published in 1987 by Southern Illinois University Press, provides a comprehensive summary of the benefits ascribed to peer critiquing. In tracing the literature on peer critiquing from 1880 to 1985, Gere finds six major reasons for which peer critiquing has been advocated: students in peer groups produce higher quality writing than students who don't participate in peer critiquing; students in peer groups develop more positive attitudes about writing (including "increased motivation toward writing and revision, reduced anxiety about writing, greater self-esteem, more sense of authority about their own texts, and enhanced feelings of solidarity with other writers"); students in peer groups experience intellectual growth (including "development of critical thinking skills, enhanced evaluative capacities, and greater ability to transfer learning from one task to another"); students in peer groups increase their rhetorical skill (including "their ability to conceptualize and address the needs of their audience"); teachers who use peer groups reduce their paper load; and finally, teachers who use peer groups can make instructional improvements (including "more individualized attention for students and greater adherence to a naturalistic or process-oriented approach to writing"). Some of these proposed benefits of peer critiquing have been empirically verified, while others have not. These six rationale, though, are the pluses we hope to gain by changing the architecture of the composition classroom to

focus on small groups.

What I will be concentrating on this morning are the minuses of this architectural change. All of us would like to believe that in a classroom comprised of small circular groups, a classroom in which the teacher is no longer posited as the sole authority, learning would necessarily be a collaborative endeavor. We would hope that peer groups would view their task not as a simple exercise in praise and blame, but as a shared effort to improve each other's understanding of writing. We would hope that students' desire to learn would make them want to share their ideas, even those they are unsure of. Ideally, students would be as attentive to the learning of their group members as to themselves; thus they would be not only thorough in their critiques but also kind, offering criticism with patience and grace.

Yet in actuality, students in peer groups resist both giving and receiving critiques. Often the writer must deliberately invite criticism in order to receive it. And even then, as Marion Crowhurst and Diana George have found through case studies, critiquers frequently preface their comments with apologies and disclaimers, such as "'No offence, but . . .'" (Crowhurst 759), "'This probably won't work but . . .'" (George 323), or "'This is only my opinion. I'm not the teacher'" (George 323). A case study by Mary Francine Danis further reveals that writers have a variety of strategies for discouraging their group members from offering evaluations: they may prematurely halt feedback by agreeing to recommendations before the reader fully articulates them (7) or may fail to ask for further explanation when they don't understand a group member's comments

(10).

In this paper, I will argue that the key to why peer groups are often marked more by inhibition and constraint than by collaboration lies in architectural design, and I will ground my thesis largely on the work of the post-structuralist historian Michel Foucault. In his 1975 book Discipline and Punish, Foucault explains that architectural design does not have merely aesthetic purposes, but can also function as a political tool which predetermines the power relationships of the structure's occupants. Foucault examines as his primary example of this phenomenon a circular architecture not unlike the structure of peer groups. In particular, his example is the building Jeremy Bentham designed in the mid-nineteenth century and named the Panopticon. The architectures of Bentham's Panopticon and of peer groups are alike in that they are both circular formations which don't recognize a visible authority figure. Bentham intended his Panopticon to function as a prison building, but as Foucault makes clear in his warnings against seeing the prison as a "dream building," that should not dissuade us from exploring the Panopticon's likeness to peer groups. To further cite Foucault, we should think of the Panopticon as "a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use" (205).

With Foucault's encouragement to consider the Panopticon as disassociated from one particular use, we can now look more closely at the Panopticon as a prison to understand what architectural principle--what "political technology" as Foucault terms it--is in effect. Bentham's prison building, as I've said, is circular. It

has an observation tower at its center, and the cells surround and face the tower. In this way, the supervisor in the tower can view all inmates easily, yet the tower is designed so that the prisoners do not know when the tower is occupied. The foreboding tower serves as a constant reminder to the prisoners that they may be being observed at any moment, yet they can never be certain whether they are. As a result, the prisoners internalize a feeling of constantly being watched, which in turn causes them to discipline themselves (Foucault 200-201). In short, because its geometry increases the opportunity for surveillance, the circular architecture creates and sustains a power structure independent of the authority's presence. As Foucault states with chilling succinctness, "the inmates [are] caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (201).

Peer critiquing also has a circular architecture which increases the occasions of observation, so that a student's work is seen more often--because the teacher is no longer the only paper-reader it's now feasible for all the planning and drafts that students generate to be examined--and is seen by more observers. As a result, students who participate in peer critiquing internalize the discipline offered by their group. For example, the students Mary Francine Danis has interviewed claim that they think about their group's past criticisms when writing later papers. One of her students who had been repeatedly corrected for her vague use of pronouns commented, "now when I type 'it,' I stop and think. . . . I'm explaining myself better now" (8). Yet students do not need to receive accurate advice from their peers in order to be disciplined. Foucault describes the

Panopticon as a architectural machine whose disciplining function is dependent on its structure, not on the qualifications or motives of the observer (202). Anyone can serve as the observer because the mere possibility of observation is what disciplines. Peer critiques, then, still discipline, even when poor writers are asked to provide advice for good writers or when students' critiques are inaccurate.

Although in peer critiquing the authority figure--the teacher-is not immediately present, it would be a mistake to think that the amount of rule being exercised in the classroom is therefore reduced. The importance students ascribe to their peers' opinions of their work is clear in Carol Berkenkotter's protocol of a student whose paper has been critiqued by classmates: "'I am glad that I didn't put my name on my paper . . . oh I did. They know who I am . . . I don't like this paper. Wish I hadn't written on this'" (317). As a second example of the disciplining effect of observation, Marion Crowhurst reports that in an experimental study she performed of peer critiquing, one of the fifth-grade classes involved "insisted on being allowed to proofread, edit and rewrite before submitting a piece to their peers" (760). And John Clifford has proven empirically that "feedback from an immediate, socially appropriate audience [specifically peer groups] seems to [provide] a more compelling impetus to change than the abstract grade rewards typical of the current-traditional paradigm" (50). Thus in peer critiquing, the observation of the teacher-sovereign is superseded by what Foucault terms "the vigilance of intersecting gazes," yielding a more subtle, coercive administration of power.

Let's now return our frame of reference to the museum exhibit's

computer that adds and subtracts points for architectural design. When we weigh the advantages and disadvantages of peer critiquing, we must acknowledge that its circular architecture, that multiplies observation and therefore discipline, is coercive. In fact, because most of the benefits attributed to peer critiquing can be achieved through more traditional pedagogies--that is, writers can receive feedback on their writing from the teacher and readers can gain evaluative skills by working with professional essays or student essays anthologized in composition textbooks--the distinguishing characteristic of peer critiquing is its increase in observation and consequently in discipline. Yet knowing all this, I am not willing to abandon peer groups. My point is that we need to recognize that the architecture of peer critiquing inherently operates at cross-purposes with our own objectives for collaborative learning. We cannot, then, simply cross our fingers and hope all goes well. If we institute peer critiquing without having the methodology to ensure that our students will do more than discipline one another, the architecture will be more likely to imprison than to empower. As writing teachers and necessarily as political agents, we face the difficult task of developing the methodology that fosters genuine collaboration. I hope this conference will be the start of that work.

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